Frontier Dreams

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FRONTIER DREAMS

Darran Anderson and Garrett Carr in conversation

The writer and mapmaker Garrett Carr and the writer Darran Anderson sat down to talk about their experiences of growing up in proximity to Ireland's border and its influence on their subsequent work in chronicling cities and landscape, history and memory. This is an edited transcript of their conversation.

DARRAN ANDERSON: When I first heard about your book The Rule of the Land (Faber & Faber), I was in the midst of writing my own (the forthcoming Tidewrack). Having grown up with a checkpoint at the end of our street, I was immediately intrigued by the prospect of a writer charting the border. And I realised we'd actually crossed paths at one or two points on our respective walks for our books, though at different times. It should be noted your book covers over 300 miles while mine, I'm ashamed to say, covers about seven.

I was wondering how you viewed the border growing up in Donegal? On the other side of it, in Derry, there was huge opposition to its existence and a real sense of relief every time we escaped beyond it. Donegal always felt like a sanctuary, but you also had an awareness that Donegal too was a kind of hinterland to the rest of the Republic. Both Derry and Donegal felt distinctly *other* and though there are a lot of differences, the two places are strangely bonded by the division. How did you see it from your side back then?

GARRETT CARR: There's nothing wrong with examining seven miles. I think there is something really pleasing about gazing long and hard at a small place, until you've gotten a sense of the layers. I'd like somebody to write an 800-page

book about a single townland, but even then a resident would complain about something left out - ‘What about the day of the …’ Ireland’s landscape and rivers are loaded with history that continues to slowly churn. Seven miles is actually a lot - you’ll probably have to write a sequel.

300 miles is definitely too much. It can’t be captured, but I aimed to create a portrait. I did book research before and after my border walks and, on the ground, I did not have to rely on a single impression. As I live in Northern Ireland, I could return to stretches if I realized I’d missed something important. Averaging it out, each chapter of The Rule of the Land covers about fifteen miles. Each stretch and chapter has a theme or two, but they were chosen from many possibilities. I could start again from the eastern end, traverse the same landscape and write an entirely different book. But I’m not planning to.

I think the border is part of every Irish person’s identity, and dealing with it - crossing it - forces us to consider the limits of who we think we are and where we belong. If you prefer your history a bit more cut-and-dry this can be uncomfortable. Not crossing the border means you can get away with never experiencing this discomfort, which may explain why many preferred not to cross it. Along the border, being Irish is more complicated than it is in Cork or Limerick - I pick on those two cities as I seem to have met a lot of Republican comment from them. I daresay it is more complicated than it is in Belfast, too. I grew up in Donegal, close enough to the border to cross it fairly regularly, but not so close that it was an area I really knew. My situation, it occurs to me now, was a recipe for destabilization. I was close enough to have to deal with the border frequently, but I was never quite prepared for it. It was always jarring; the military installation on the horizon, the Union Jacks flying from church steeples. The destabilization was bound to settle eventually and, I guess, I’ve ended up in a place where I mistrust easy answers, holding a pluralist worldview. I think you’d have to embrace pluralism to draw positives from this

kind of background and I have ended up choosing to live in Belfast so I suppose I did embrace it. Something that shaped this flexi-identity - it may seem small but I think it could be important - is that we were able to pick up BBC television stations when I was a child. I watched them the most because there were no ad breaks. And Bosco and his plasticine friends had no appeal compared to the bigger budget shows on the BBC. I later learned that many of my contemporaries further south lived in RTÉ-only households. This seemed a terrible impoverishment.

But of course Donegal's general impoverishment was a more serious thing. Almost completely surrounded by a hard border, it was disadvantaged economically. The transitions I experienced when crossing the border weren't really political. To me, I was going from a poor place to a wealthy one, at least that was how it seemed at the time. Relatedly, it was a rural to urban transition, as we lived in a village but it was often Derry that we travelled to. I loved the streets, the cinema, the bookshops. A proper city! At least that was how it seemed at the time.

It is not often discussed but even during the Troubles, Northern Ireland had a consumerist glow about it - and the poorer you were the more appealing it was. There was more stuff in the North and it was cheaper. I was always saving money for the next time I was in the North, I wanted art materials and books. I was mirroring my parents, who wanted household goods. It's easy to dismiss the allure of shopping, but it had power.

Now that I live in Belfast I'm aware that Donegal had a glow for people on this side of the line too, although of a very different sort. I enjoy the way Donegal has been adopted by Northern Ireland. Many people have such positive associations with the county that it brings an immediate warmth into my encounters. I think a lot of this is rooted in childhood memories. Donegal was an important place of respite during the Troubles, so people are thinking back to twenty years ago and more. I can well imagine how children in the back seat of

a car would sense their parents' relief once they had gotten over the border and were in Donegal. The release of pressure would have been detected long before the kids understood the reasons for it, and it must have shaped the meaning of Donegal in their personal geographies. Many trips to Donegal were made during the summer so many of the memories are sunlit and I suspect, in some unconsidered way, people think of Donegal as a place where the sun always shines. This is not the reality. I am remembering too the sunny, dreamy, Donegal flashbacks in Steve McQueen's film Hunger. Michael Fassbender, playing Bobby Sands, captured a certain softness in his facial expression, a vulnerability that emerges when caught up in a reminiscence. It is actually an expression I see quite often in Belfast when I tell people that I am from Donegal and they are suddenly reminded of something.

But I am talking about Belfast. Derry, where Donegal is a constant and close presence, must have a more nuanced and down-to-earth relationship with the county. Or is it possible still to idealise the hills that begin at the end of your street?

DA: I think an idealisation definitely happened. As a child, I remember many times watching the sun set over the Donegal mountains from the top of a brutalist block of flats, now knocked down, and thinking it might as well be some spellbinding fictional landscape. It wasn't entirely without substance though. I sometimes think one of the reasons why I've spent the past few years giving talks on the need for reviving the utopian impulse in terms of politics, cities and architecture goes back to childhood. The influence not just of Free Derry, declaring the city to be something else entirely, but Donegal as a refuge we escaped to. We situate utopian dreams in the future when really the desire is probably a nostalgic one.

I can't lie and say the place doesn't have a certain mystique for me. When you're living through your formative years, experiences you enjoyed quite superficially gain so much resonance later on. You see it even with photographs from the '70s and '80s now, even if they were throwaway at the time. The memories become part of a kind of internal iconography that you keep referencing, consciously or not, and they say those are among the last to fade at the end of life. I'm certain images of camping at the fort at Ned's Point with the comet Halle Bopp burning in the night sky or climbing Slieve League or fishing in the Poisoned Glen will be rattling about my brain for years to come. It seems almost dream-like to me and therein lies the problem. I think if the North shows anything it's that too much nostalgia can be a distorting thing, and almost a betrayal of the present.

I think this view prevails not only because of the brutality of the Troubles but the mediocrity of it. The daily grinding tedium. The greyness. Not just the gunshots and bombs but the bomb scares and the casual abuse and the casual threats and the drone of helicopters. There were shops, as you say, but you had your bag searched going into them, or if you worked in them, as I did, you'd routinely search for incendiary devices as part of cashing up, and the shutters came down at night. I remember the first time I went abroad, to Barcelona, being mesmerised not just by how different and glorious the architecture was but how they kept the shop windows glistening and illuminated at night and no one put a brick through them or drove a car into them. There was a different kind of yearning there, not the nostalgic one you find in something like Walter Benjamin's Berlin Childhood but one that was actually for the future.

You did get a palpable feeling of exhaling when you crossed the border and people remember that deep down, like muscle memory. So the idea of a border ever coming back, in whatever form, is not a good thing psychologically. I think one of the worst things partition did, aside from dividing the island and

dividing Ulster, was it created that schism inside people's minds, simplifying incredibly complex issues into binaries and false certainties. We're fooled into a sense that this is how it was always destined to be, forgetting that history is always contingent upon the decisions of individuals. We forget people sat in rooms effectively inventing the border, as surely as they did with Africa and the Middle East. It could've been different. None of it was set in stone. I grew up with the border checkpoint right there, close enough for windows in our housing estate to be blown in when a mortar was fired at it by the IRA. We passed through it every day to go to the shop and always with baited breath that you'd be hassled. Or you could cross via the backroads which had obstacles there that looked as if they'd stop tanks. When the checkpoints finally came down, I found myself struggling to believe that there even was a border, outside of people's minds. It took a suspension of disbelief I've always struggled with. All nations are fictions to a degree but some are more convincing than others and living along the border, it struck me almost as a form of collective madness, meeting people who so deeply believed in it, as surely as if there was a Himalayan mountain range there. It was an article of faith and faith, even more than dreams, requires gross simplifications. In contrast, all I could see on the landscape that I'd grown up on was crisscrossing rivers, fields, wildlife and people.

I get a real sense from your book, Garrett, with the lore-of-places aspect that runs through the chapters, that history has been a palimpsest where stories have been written over or evolve many times and even when they are fixed, in the actual names of places, they can still be forgotten in clear sight. Alongside the politics of the place, I've run into joyriders, smugglers, and fugitives along that stretch so these other, more secretive, histories are still being written. I imagine that's the case with any border area across the world, and it certainly chimes with ones I've explored further afield in Europe and Asia. Did you feel a sense of history or even an absence of history in certain areas? Did you find any

stories that surprised you or did historical events resonate because of their similarities with today?

GC: History was certainly a presence for me during my border walk - and I had done a lot of background research but I don't think this was entirely the reason for it. When I encountered a person the first thing they'd often do was point out where the border was, showing the route it was taking through hills. I generally knew well where the border was, I had detailed maps with me, but I always listened as the description often included local history. The stories were often anecdotal, often about smuggling. In my experience, Borderlanders are discrete, they rarely want to talk about the Troubles and will offer less difficult subjects instead. An interest in the past might be one side-effect of living on a border. They are aware that, as you say, the border was an invention that could have easily been drawn very differently, or not drawn at all. They've seen some of the strange and unpredictable ways in which historical events get impressed on the ground, forcing society into strange shapes. No wonder they develop an interest in the past.

Ruins along the border have a certain active quality. Perhaps a sign of a politically stable region is that historic ruins are allowed to sink into the background, become merely postcard fodder. The Elizabethan and Norman castles along Ireland's border have not quite done this. They are still too challenging and loaded with meaning. They are kept alive as they can be used as analogies with more recent histories, getting compared to the watchtowers of the Troubles, for example. They can even illustrate the contemporary - the possibility of a hard border returning. My project, the survey, the maps and the book that resulted, were conceived in the afterglow of the Good Friday Agreement. The border was not exactly stable, but it had arrived at a certain calm and perhaps the ruins were starting to settle down. It seemed like

a good time for me to examine the border and try and find out what it meant. But before I finished The Rule of the Land, the UK voted to leave the European Union, and suddenly the air was full of questions and the analogies started buzzing again.

Among the oldest constructions along the border are sections of the Black Pig's Dyke. These are earthwork embankments that would have originally been topped with palisade walls. Parts of these defences run parallel to the border, and within a few miles of it. They are 2000 years old. It seems the border has some surprisingly ancient ancestors - although I'm not sure one should claim they are directly related. One section in South Armagh is called the Dorsey. It was not just a wall but a gateway, an official entrance and exit for the old kingdom of Ulster. It was where people on the way in could be checked and people on the way out could be taxed. Nowadays, not too far south and on the other side of the border, Gardaí board buses and trains to check passenger IDs, looking for illegal migrants. Analogies come easy on the border.

DA: There's a Walt Whitman quote, from Leaves of Grass, that I find I keep coming back to - 'Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.' This idea of plurality within individuals, in terms of identity, gender, sexuality and so on, but also in a wider societal sense. There are any number of possibilities in the future but it was that way in the past, too. So much of what we take as having been inevitable could've been so different or *was* so different. History, architecture, culture are all contingent things that came about, often, due to particular decisions. Or even sometimes due to accidents and coincidences. I got a real sense writing Tidewrack of how, despite all the larger forces that weigh on people's lives, history is still not entirely rigid, even though we look back at it as if it was somehow always preordained. Allegiances shift and identities seem more fluid than we often suspect. My grandfather fought for the British Army and his sons fought against

the British Army. They'd been welcomed as protectors and within a couple of years they were feared and despised. On the other side of the family, my grandfather's livelihood changed according to the times but it was all concentrated on the same border stretch along the River Foyle; he was a fisherman, a smuggler during the war, a minesweeper immediately after it and he searched for the bodies of suicide victims throughout. As looming and permanent as something like a river is, it is also perpetually changing and in motion. That seems to me symbolic of time. What we think of as fixed is not necessarily so.

What are your thoughts about how the borderlands might change in the potentially turbulent years ahead?

GC: I do enjoy a good alternative history novel. Although the genre is dominated by visions of what might have happened if Hitler won the Second World War and I don't know of any Irish novels of alternative history. One parallel universe that could be used as a setting for such a novel is an Ireland that was not partitioned in 1922. However, most plotlines I can dream up end with Ireland still being partitioned, it just happens a few years later. It is easier to imagine an alternative that has the border, but elsewhere. Northern Ireland could have quite easily tried to claim all nine counties of Ulster, or just the four closest to Belfast. Both these versions were considered in the lead up to partition. The former would have been particularly unstable, I think.

If you really want an alternative Ireland without a border at all then you might have to go further back and put a stop to Irish independence. Then there's no partition, and Britain's twentieth century would look very different as well. Perhaps today Ireland would be more like Scotland: in the union but with a keen sense of its own identity, a devolved parliament and a popular nationalist movement. Perhaps there is something to be said for this version. By and large, in debates about Scottish independence, both nationalist and unionist are able to

make positive and pluralistic arguments for their positions. Both can say why Scotland will be at its best inside or outside of the union. The debate gets nasty sometimes, but it's still about one hundred times healthier than Northern Ireland's, even though the constitutional question is just as profound. There has been a heartening lack of bombs.

It seems to me that 1922's partition enabled sectarianism to thrive in both parts of the island. It was certainly a high price to pay for independence, although I wouldn't like to say if it was a price worth paying or not. The border created two counties where religion and politics were fused together, two counties that were inflexible, prone to myth-making and then believing their own myths. It could be argued that we are only starting to recover from this now. But admitting the border's negative repercussions is not the same as saying the border should be erased. We're going to have to work from where we are now rather than trying to rewind the clock. The purpose of the future is not to redress the errors of the past. To try and force the future into that role would be to misuse it.

Ultimately, at the beginning of the twentieth century, no part of Ireland seemed able to imagine itself a patchwork culture, hosting minorities and populations with clashing loyalties. It was dilution that we could not countenance, so we got partition. It was simply all we could manage at the time. But it was a hundred years ago, and I think we have bigger imaginations now.

As regards the post-Brexit border landscape, at this stage anything seems possible. A fully checkpointed border is within the realm of possibility. That the border retains its invisibility for most of us is also feasible. At the moment, with the Conservatives in a minority government and weak, it seems even possible that it won't happen at all. Talking to people along the border, what I found mainly was a frustration at being pushed around by big and distance powers. When I asked what they felt the border would be like in a few years most people wouldn't commit to any particular vision, but a pragmatism would kick in. They

would refer to exchange rates or the price of particular products, already able to pinpoint where new pressures on their livelihoods might come from. ‘See that border,’ said one farmer, pointing to where it went through his land, ‘I wish you’d take it away with you.’